

COMMUNICATION: A VITAL STRATEGY FOR MANAGING MARITAL PROBLEMS

Omozuwa Margaret Osarugue

School of Education
College of Education
Ekiadolor-Benin

Abstract

Marital problem is an age long issue that eats into the fabrics of marriages resulting in separation, divorce. It causes lots of harm to the couples, their family and the society at large. This paper investigated the sources of marital problems, and common methods of managing marital problems. It offers to use communication as a vital strategy to eradicate the menace.

Key Words: Communication, Marital problems, Divorce, Separation, Strategies

Introduction

Marital problems are issues that are difficult to deal with or understand in marital relationship most of which occur as a result of poor communication. Although couples become unhappy with their marriages for a variety of reasons, there are several recurring themes that are frequently associated with marital distress. The most frequent problem reported by unhappy couples is poor communication. Spouses often feel that their partners are making excessive demands or requesting much more than they can give. Other spouses feel that their partners are too withdrawn or do not share or open up enough. Finally, distressed spouses often avoid talking about problems in their relationships because they end up arguing and fighting with each other. These communication problems often result in spouses feeling bad about themselves, their partners, and their relationships. Marital problems can also be seen as non-positive experiences of couples in a family, which often lead to separation or divorce if not well managed.

Family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household, interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles as parents, children and extended family. According to Dagari (1994) communication in the home is the exchange of ideas, thoughts, knowledge and teaching by members of that home. Communication is making of ideas, information and feelings known in such a way

that it is understood and response is made by the person with whom communication is made. Ijeoma (1991) believes that the elements present in communication include “source, message, channel, receiver, feedback and noise”.

According to Cronkbit (1975) the result of ineffective communication can be described as noise or communication gap. The pattern of communication in homes depends on equality or difference. A wife may communicate with the husband as equal but the parents interact with their children not as equals. Communication can be used in homes for instruction, information exchange of knowledge, asking questions etc. Most information are communicated orally when ambiguous statement are to be clarified. Physical gestures and words are often used to communicate feelings; listening, body language and tone of voice are important parts of communication. According to Holrnes and Sachs (1998) the tone of voice may provide a hint of the feelings that the other person is unable to put into words, such as anger, frustration, enthusiasm, tiredness, sadness, joy, facial expression, body posture etc which gives clues to their interaction with one another.

Technology has greatly enhanced communication tie between persons especially couples who live together or apart. With the GSM (mobile) phoning system, it is easy for persons to share ideas, opinions emotions etc on phone. It should be noted however, that marital problem is an age long issue that eats into the fabrics of marriages resulting in separations and divorce, causing lots of harm to the couple, their off springs and their generation if not well handled and resolved. According to Waite and Gallenge (2000) marriage is seen as a union of love between an adult male and female, a rite which affirms love, provides a source of social recognition and a gateway to legal protections, responsibilities and benefits. Akinade and Sulaiman (2005) believe that if couples could identify and recognize their problems and actively resolve them amicably, then problems and conflicts can serve as a catalyst in deepening relationship.

Research carried out by Ambakederemo (2005) has shown that marriage benefits spouses' health and happiness and that children do better in two parents household than single or no parent household. Marital problem causes marital instability and is anti-development. Ogan's (2001) study in some parts of Nigeria revealed that there are more than 26,500 cases of rape, about 614,260 cases of teenage pregnancies, 60,000 cases of illegal abortion widespread drug abuse, cultism, rebellion, violence among youths, and political instability resulting from marital problems and children being reared by single parents. Kemp (1994) studied 55 married university students and discovered that marital problem is anti-development and those whose marriages functioned well have high self-esteem, egalitarian role expectation, attempted to promote growth in each other and agreed on the goals of marriage, whereas those whose marriages were unstable related negatively to those characteristics.

Sources of Marital Problems

According to Akinade (1997) and Niolon (2003), the most common sources of marital problems include: finance, infidelity, children, in-laws and friends, sex, self-disclosure, privacy etc.

Finance

Finance is one of the sources of problems in marriage. Most times there is quarrel or argument over how money that comes into the home should be used; their priority in terms of financial commitment -such as training the children, type of school the children should attend, building a house, buying a car, giving to the less privileged or the orphanages, spending money as it comes or spending a little and having large reserve for the rainy day. Quarrel may arise over knowing one another's pay or financial status. When a partner wants to control the expenditure of the other partner, conflict may also arise.

Communication is an important tool in solving the aforementioned problems relating to finance in homes. If couples could open up and dialogue/discuss among themselves concerning

money that comes into the home from both partners and how such money should be expended, then marital problems arising from finance administration would have been well managed if not fully eradicated.

Infidelity

Forste and Koray's (1996) research emphasized that premarital sex is associated with couples having secondary sex partners after marriage. There is need for parents, teachers, counsellors, the clergy and others to communicate good virtues and morals to children so that such children will not be involved in premarital sex and the attendant consequences. In most homes, couples take their partners for granted. Some feel they are too close not to desire affection and a show of love especially in verbal compliments like "you are beautiful", "this food is appetizing" - "I love you" etc. Such couples may therefore go outside the home to fill such vacuums created by the non-caring partner and this action could lead to problems in the home. Most times, either of the couple may have children before marriage, may have been married before with or without children (divorced), may have taken to prostitution or robbery in order to train herself/himself as an orphan and perhaps the eldest among other helpless children that needed education. If couples discuss and know themselves, some of these issues would not generate problems of any kind in the home.

Children

The birth of children into homes brings a type of pleasure and sign of fulfilment to the couple. It also helps to strengthen the marriage tie. However, it may also be a major source of marital problems if couples fail to discuss their priority and are not open to accept what ever comes their way in terms of having children in the marriage. Couples may quarrel over the number of children to have in the family, may have different views about children's upbringing, discipline, education, morals, responsibilities, absence of children, sex (male or female), number of children etc. If couples do not reach

an agreement on these issues, it may degenerate into marital problems, which may end up in separation and divorce.

In-laws and Friends

Problems may arise in marriage as a result of misconception, insecurity and prejudices. A husband may not want to see the wife with her old friends and vice-versa. A mother-in-law may feel insecure because of the presence of the daughter-in-law who she feels now prevents her from enjoying the confidence of her son and blames any disagreement between her and the son on the wife. The wife may enter the marriage with a lot of prejudice about mothers-in-law, gets herself ready to deal with any mother-in-law so she becomes hostile and confrontational to her mother-in-law.

Couples should learn to discuss and settle their differences without intrusion from friends and in-laws.

Sex

The term “sex” is often used ambiguously. Sometimes it refers to gender - that is, being male or female. At other times it means sexual behaviour or the sexual act. Sexual expression is one of the happiest, most rewarding, and pleasurable experiences in a couple's life. It is relevant that issues of sex must be discussed by couples because it requires mutual agreement as to when and how it should come up. Sex can be a source of marital problems when there is sexual dysfunction in any or both couples or when there is evidence of extra-marital sex. Problems can arise in homes when couples deny their partners of sexual pleasure when the urge for sex occurs. These denials however, can lead to either of the couple having secondary sex partner outside the home, which can cause marital problems that may degenerate to separation and divorce.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is the ability of couples to reveal to themselves who they really are without fear or prejudice. Most times self-disclosure may yield negative feedback (for example, if a girl

discloses to the husband that she had sex with the husband's close friend before they married). This may make the husband hate the wife and may lead to rebuke, withdrawal and low self esteem on the part of the wife. Though lies may form the foundation for a successful wedding, the truth when revealed in the marriage could cause problems, which may lead to separation or divorce. Couples should be truthful and sincere to each other in their daily living. Couples should be open to each other and not hide secret because such secrets when disclosed by either of the couples may lead to separation or divorce. Truth should be the watchword for a successful marriage. It should be noted however, that if self disclosure is effectively used by couples, tension would decrease and there will be increased self esteem and enhanced ability to cope in stressful situations because favourable response from self disclosure will go a long way in strengthening relationship.

Privacy

Most couples enjoy having their privacy in terms of time, property, emotions and space. Couples must agree on their limits/boundaries in terms of respect for each other, privacy such as not reading each others mail, text messages on cell phone, gazing at each other's nakedness especially when bathing or dressing up etc.

Problems of Effective Communication in Marriages

According to Herbut (1969) once information is misconceived in the family, a non-conducive atmosphere is created within the home. The once harmonious relationship is threatened and family members begin to wear frown, argue and become hostile towards one another. Birdwhistell (1970) is of the opinion that spoken language or body language alone will not give full meaning to what a person is saying. Any one therefore that relies solely on either of the two (body language or spoken language) may have distorted information. The union of body language and spoken language will enhance effective communication. Some individuals

flex muscles, fight, and point fingers etc when expressing anger and this has adverse effect on family communication. Some parents are often too busy searching for money that they hardly have time to communicate with their children. Some couples also experience poor interaction because they are too busy searching for business enhancement and so hardly find time to open up and discuss matters bothering them with their partners. Poor communication in homes breeds hostility, hatred, mistrust, disharmony, unrest and can degenerate to either of the couples packing out of home especially if either of the couples is not ready for a divorce.

Common Methods of Managing Marital Problems

Akinade (1997) believes that common methods of managing marital problems include: submission, compromise, standoff, and withdrawal.

Submission: The problem ends or goes when either of the couple submits or agrees with the other, e.g. saying; “if it is your wish that I don’t attend the birthday party, it is all right by me”.

Compromise ends a problem when a middle ground between the opposing positions is found. Either of the couple may say; “if I have to forgo the birthday party, you need to buy a bottle of malt drink for me and we will not need to discuss the birthday issue anymore”.

Standoff occurs when arguments are dropped without resolving. Couples may decide to drop the issues without any compromise. One of the couples may say, “Okay, we don’t need to talk more on the issue”.

Withdrawal occurs when the disputant may decide not to continue with the argument. He or she walks out of the scene without agreeing on the issue e.g. not reaching an agreement on the issue of the birthday party.

Methods of Enhancing Effective Communication in Marriage

Couple as unique individuals should be able to express their feelings in different ways for their partner to understand. When any of the couple is talking, the other should listen attentively, making use of eye contact, and other non verbal techniques such as smiling, nodding etc. This will help to express interest in the speaker and confidence in the listener. The listener should also be attentive and ask questions on areas that need clarification. Rick (2005) believes that effective communication includes learning to listen and understand words, listen and understand the body language. Relaxed mood while listening to a speaker shows acceptance of what the speaker is saying and being alert shows that the listener is paying attention. A listener would incline the body to the speaker and sit forward when actual interest is paid to the topic.

Couples should express themselves verbally and be engaged in positive talks. They should express themselves, share feelings, thoughts, and values; they should also talk over their differences on issues that are not understood. Issues can be discussed effectively on bed, when watching television or when involved in family chores. Couples should discuss among themselves in a positive and trusting climate and environment devoid of mistrust and avoid distorted messages. Couples should develop friendly and easy rapport to enhance communication and eliminate communication gap.

Strategies for Managing Marital Problems

The following strategies could be adopted in managing marital problems.

- Couples should respect each other's opinion and not berate one another for any reason for marital harmony.
- When problems are identified, address one problem at a time, letting your partner know how you feel and ensure clarification and understanding before addressing other problems.

- Couples should avoid any form of competition over who wins or loses in any argument. Either of the couple may compromise for peace to reign. They should avoid the use of accusatory language to avoid putting the partner on the defence, which could lead to either a fight back or retreat to a shell.
- Couples should create a right place for discussion of issues. The environment for talks should be very conducive for that purpose - not in a friend's place, an in-laws place nor in public.
- Set time aside for meaningful discussion of issues. Discussion may be when you both resign to bed, when children are sleeping at night but not when you are on the way to work or when preparing to go to work.
- Couples should not allow their children understand that there is problem in the home. Children must not watch their parents engage in arguments, quarrel or fight. So couples should settle their differences without allowing their children in as third party.
- Couples should always apologise to one another anytime either offends the other or uses derogatory words on the partner.
- Couples should respect the partner's family and avoid using insulting or derogatory words on the partner's family in times of arguments.

Relevance of Human Communication in Marriage

- Communication in humans helps to establish close affinity in relationships. All humans hate to be isolated and there is always harmony in any home where communication is encouraged.
- Communication enhances interaction between persons and brings in information and understanding of issues that need clarification

- Communication may have positive influence on people when couples communicate with responsible or significant persons. Communication with the wrong or irresponsible person may, however, have undesirable effect. A married man/woman may be negatively influenced by a drunkard friend or a prostitute friend. On the other hand, verbal discussion with a disciplined and responsible married couple on issues of marriage will positively influence the home/couple.

Conclusion

Communication is a relevant tool for a healthy and harmonious union. Couples should learn to interact with each other; express themselves to each other to eliminate communication gap, which can result to soiling good relationship and enhancing marital problems.

No other method can actually hold marriages together except “communication” which, stands out as a crucial component of marital life and a vital strategy for managing marital problems.

References

- Akinade, E. A. (1997) Toward Halicise Titles Marriage. Ibadan: Caltop Publishers.
- Akinade, E. A. and Dulaman, A. A (2005): Sexuality Education and Couple Guidance. Ibadan: Babs Olatunji Publishers.
- Allen, J. (2001): As a Man Thinketh; USA: Executive Books.
- Amayo, A. O. (2002): The Relative Effectiveness of Conflict Resolution Skills Training on Marital Adjustment of some Selected Couples. The Counsellor 19 (1) 1-11
- Ambakederemo, E. T. (2005): Assessment of Factors Responsible for Divorce in Port Harcourt Metropolis in Rivers State. Unpublished MSc Project Report. Department of Agric Economics and Extension, Faculty of Agriculture, River State

- University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. MSc Unpublished Thesis.
- Benokraitis, N. V. (1996) *Marriage and Families: Changes, Choice and Constraints*. New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- Birdwhistell in Fast, J. (1970); *Bodily Language*, New York. Evans and Company Inc.
- Cronkrite, G. (1976) *Communication and Awareness*, Menlo Park California: Cummings Pub. Co.
- Dagari, B. K. (1994): *Pattern of Communication Process between Married Couples in Zaria Education Zone*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Department of Education, A. B. U. Zaria pg 9.
- Fortie, R. and Koray, T. (1996): *Sexual Exclusivity Among Dating, Cohabiting and Married Women*. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*: 58, 33-47
- Herbert, S (1969): *The New Sciences of Management Decision*. New York. Harper and Row Publishers.
- Holnes, P and Sachs, M. A. (1998) *Family Communication Overcoming Obstacles: Home and Away Series*. HYG 5792. Family and Consumer Sciences Accessed 18/07/06.
- Idowu, A. I. and Esere, M. O. (2007): *Communication in Counselling: A Multidimensional perspective*. Ilorin: Tim-Sal Publishers.
- Ijeoma, C. I. (1991) *Modern Techniques of Communication Paper Presented at the Seminar Workshop on the Role of Information Officers in the 3rd Republic*.
- Kemp, V, M. (1994): *The Impact of Parental Divorce on Children Educational Attainment, Marital Timing and Likelihood of Divorce*. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 50 (3) 707-809.
- Ker, B. O. (2003): *Counselling for a Sustainable Democracy*. *The Journal of Counselling and Development* 1 (1) 17-20
- Leach, S. S. (1976) *History of Elementary School Guidance, Overview and Critique*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Niolon, R. (2003). *Divorce*. Retrieved 20 October 2007: <http://wwwpsychpage.com/family.divorce/childrenudjust.htm>.

- Obi, D. P (2003) Counselling for Effective Policy for Sustainable Democracy. Spectrum Owerri: Joe Mankpa Publishers.
- Ogan, S. (2001) Prophetic Marriages in the New Apostolic Era. Port Harcourt: Rehoboth Publishers.
- Rick, Cecil (2005): How to Listen: Attention Skills Accessed 18/07/2006
- Waite I. and Gallagher, M. (2003): The Case for Marriages: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially, Journal of Labour Economics. 1 (1) 25-33.